

ECONOMIC POLICY, TRADE, DEVELOPMENT

The left and political pragmatism in Latin America

By Greg Weeks / May 27, 2015

When analyzing Latin America, it is high time we stopped using the imagery of a “pink tide” and stop depicting the region in “good lefts” or “bad lefts.” Despite the rhetoric we often hear from politicians and pundits alike, with few exceptions we are entering an era of pragmatism and centrism.

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It’s a welcome change from the extremes that have historically plagued the region—but, unfortunately, still plague the way many talk about it today.

Latin Americans are not as ideological as commonly portrayed. They want solutions to certain core challenges, and their support for presidents hinges primarily on finding solutions, not on ideology.

The “pink tide” refers to leftist or center-left governments elected since former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez was first voted into office in 1998. These

governments we are told largely reject market dogmatism and are wary of the United States. They seek to foster greater equality and popular participation. Those who use the term generally see these governments as a bloc, or nearly so. So the question is often whether “they” will last or whether “they” are unpopular, with the assumption there is a coherent “they.”

Our discussion, understanding and analysis of the region would all be better served by breaking out of the left/right dichotomy, which is a Cold War hangover. Despite all the rhetoric coming out of Venezuela, in the rest of the region capitalism has won. The vast majority of what we consider the Latin American left operates under the assumption that policies should be geared to harnessing capitalism, not overthrowing it. As a result, most governments defy easy binary categorization.

In practice, among other things, this means governments combine greater attention to social welfare with close attention to market forces and foreign investment. Ask Peruvians who live around mines what they think of Ollanta Humala (who, incidentally, says he is not left or right, but “below”). Ask Brazilian leftists about Dilma Rousseff bringing a conservative banker (who she once clashed with) back to the finance ministry and then talking openly of the need for austerity.

It also means that the current crop of so-called leftist leaders sometimes talk in socialist terms but govern capitalist. Michelle Bachelet, after all, is a member of the Socialist Party even though she carefully protects the most capitalist economy in the hemisphere. Bolivia’s Minister of the Economy and Public Financing keeps a picture of Che Guevara in his office while cultivating foreign investors. Ecuador’s Rafael Correa criticizes global capitalism while inviting foreign investment in mining. Venezuelan union leaders support selling cars in U.S. dollars to protect their jobs.

Even more important, there is abundant evidence that Latin Americans have remarkably ideology-free views of their greatest challenges. For the past decade, Vanderbilt University has published AmericasBarometer data through its Latin American Public Opinion Project. Citizens of countries as varied as Venezuela and

Colombia say the same thing: we are concerned with corruption and personal security. Those problems are more important to the average person than ideology; indeed, they transcend it.

Furthermore, ideology does not correlate to presidential popularity. Pragmatic Latin Americans look beyond the rhetoric and seek results. Those we consider leftist presidents are no more likely than others to have high job approval ratings. [A September 2014 Mitofsky report](#) shows that some of the most *and* least popular presidents in Latin America would fall under the “leftist” label.

In other words, most Latin Americans do not view governments of the left or right (or somewhere in between) as inherently superior. They want to see improvements in their quality of life, and clearly they do not believe any ideology necessarily addresses their concerns any better or worse.

[The 2013 Latinobarómetro poll](#) shows that 55 percent of Latin Americans don't even consider themselves “left” or “right” at all. A majority are centrist, with keen interest in moderate solutions to universal problems. Unfortunately, countless news stories play up the ideological angle.

Insisting on continued use of “pink tide” imagery has the effect of skewing expectations. Analysts are surprised or disappointed when candidates campaign on the left and govern from the center, instead of viewing it as the norm which is more accurate. [U.S. policy makers unnecessarily come to the conclusion](#) that candidates would be automatic adversaries if elected. It also advances the [erroneous argument](#) that U.S.-Latin American relations are in crisis. We'd produce better analyses and better policy if we recognize the growing centrism.

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